SHRIMP/FISHING INDUSTRY

In a news release, dated November 21, 1979[25], the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department stated that "the environmental impact of oil from the Mexican well in Campeche Bay has for the most part been minimal on Texas fish and wildlife resources." The release went on to say "Based on information now available, there is no evidence of noticeable damage to Texas fish or wildlife other than possibly redfish larvae as a result of the oil spill."

But in a letter dated November 5, 1979 [11] from Charles Travis, executive director of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, to Rep. Bennie Bock, Chairman of the Committee on Environmental Affairs, Travis stated that "An oil spill of the magnitude of IXTOC-1 could be devastating to fish and wildlife populations along the Texas coast and the Texas portion of the Gulf of Mexico". "Sports and commercial fish and other aquatic organisms will have sustained the major damages to fish and wildlife", wrote Travis.

The Department continues to be concerned about the impact on the red drum which spawn in the shallow Gulf near passes from mid-August through November, when the heaviest oil pollution occurred in the Gulf. After fertilization, the eggs float to the surface until they hatch in about 72 hours. The eggs do not die after contact with the mousse, but a high percentage of the larvae produced are deformed at the time of hatching. The presence of oil during the period of red drum spawning could have affected the 1979 reproduction on the Texas coast.

"Shrimp represents the most valuable fishery of the state and nation..." stated Ralph Rayburn, executive director of the Texas Shrimp Association. "Should the oil leaking from IXTOC I cause significant damage to the shrimp resources, not only will a multi-million dollar a year industry fall, but also a vital link in the marine food web will be removed."[26]

Dr. Addison Lee Lawrence, Director of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, stated in his draft proposal for a Data Assessment Plan, dated October 16, 1979, that "the potential effect of the oil on the reproduction potential of the commercial shrimp should be evaluated because:

1. a decrease in the reproductive potential of the commercial shrimp would produce a dramatic and significant reduction of the shrimp populations in the Gulf of Mexico; and
2. the maturation-reproductive phase is the most sensitive biological event in the life history of living organisms to changing environmental conditions."[27]

TOURISM

The news media coverage at the time of the IXTOC I oil spill persuaded the public to stay away from the Texas beaches even before the oil actually hit the coast. Normally in August, the Texas beaches are prime tourist attractions bringing in millions of dollars in revenue. Through the efforts of the Federal, State and local governments, as well as the private sector, most of the oil was successfully removed from the beaches in time for the Labor Day weekend but the impression was already formed and the tourists did not come. Economic losses were heavy from Galveston to South Padre Island. South Padre Island was especially hard hit, according to Frank Hildebrand, executive director of the Texas Tourist Development Agency. Lost revenue there was between $16-20 million. The middle coast also suffered severe damage. The upper coast around Galveston was affected adversely by oil from the ruptured tanker Burmah Agate.[28]

Hotel/motel revenue from the calendar quarter ending September 30, 1979, estimated losses in room rentals for the period was 25%. The loss in revenue was incurred during the last three weeks in August. The oil spill and the resulting publicity caused occupancy to drop from 100% to less than 30%, according to Ralph Thompson, executive vice president of the South Padre Island Tourist Bureau.[29]

The long term effects of the oil spill and the publicity it generated has not yet been determined. As long as the IXTOC I well remains uncapped the beaches of Texas could once again become polluted this spring when the currents turn north again. The economic losses would even be more substantial because an entire tourist season could be affected rather than just a three week period.